



Dana E. Blackwell
Executive Director

LOS ANGELES COUNTY COMMISSION FOR CHILDREN AND FAMILIES

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DR. HARRIETTE F. WILLIAMS, CHAIR

APPROVED MINUTES

The General Meeting of the Commission for Children and Families was held on Monday, **January 10, 2005**, in room 140 of the Kenneth Hahn Hall of Administration, 500 West Temple Street, Los Angeles. **Please note that these minutes are intended as a summary and not as a verbatim transcription of events at this meeting.**

COMMISSIONERS PRESENT (Quorum Established)

Joyce Fahey
Phalen G. Hurewitz
Helen Kleinberg
Daisy Ma
Dr. La-Doris McClaney
Sandra Rudnick
Dr. Harriette Williams

COMMISSIONERS ABSENT (Excused/Unexcused)

Carol O. Biondi
Patricia Curry
Adelina Sorkin

APPROVAL OF THE AGENDA

The agenda for the January 10, 2005 meeting was unanimously approved noting that a Director's Report would not be included.

APPROVAL OF MINUTES

The minutes for the December 13, 2004 general meeting were unanimously approved.

CHAIR'S REPORT:

- Chair Williams advised members of the Commission that they will be receiving an agenda topics calendar prior to the next Commission meeting.

- Chair Williams announced that the Southern Christian Leadership Conference and the Martin Luther King Legacy Association will honor Commissioner McClanely with the Rosa Parks awards during its Martin Luther King birthday celebration.
- Commissioner Hurewitz acknowledged the recognition given to The Alliance for Children's Rights and Public Counsel on their work on Adoption Saturday's in a recent article in a legal publication of the California Bar Association.

DIRECTOR'S REPORT: Dr. Sanders was not present.

NEW BUSINESS:

DCFS Hotline: Joi Russell, Division Chief, provided the Commission with an update of improvements to the Department's Hotline operations. Those improvements include:

1. The implementation of RAVS (Referral Address Validation System) which is an automated system that locates the correct SPA office and law enforcement agency associated with the incoming Hotline referral. The system has been in place for four months and Ms. Russell believes that it has been successful.
2. The number of supervisors responsible for five day response referrals is doubled on Thursdays to ensure that the referrals are assigned to the appropriate worker in the regions in a timely manner. As a result, the regional workers are able to respond to the referral in a more organized and planned manner.
3. An automated SCAR (Suspected Child Abuse Report) report website will be implemented within the next two weeks. The website will allow mandated reporters to send their SCAR reports to the Department electronically which will allow the Department to handle and track the reports more efficiently. It will also allow for better tracking of the data by regions and type of reporter. This website is the first of its kind in California. Mandated reporters will be able to access the website from the DCFS website. A tutorial of how to use the website will also be available.
4. Automation of cross reports (physical/sexual/severe neglect) with law enforcement is being developed so that these reports can also be transmitted electronically. The development of this system is taking place in partnership with both the sheriff's office and other various police agencies throughout the county.

Ms. Russell stated that the Hotline staff is utilizing Structured Decision Making (SDM) 100% of the time and that they are compliant in using it in the designated timeframe 98% of the time. She admitted that there are areas where improvement is needed and that SDM is not making the decision about detention 100% of the time. Ms. Russell stated that it will take time for staff to alter their "mind set" about the appropriate utilization of this tool. Supervisors are monitoring staffs use of SDM so that improvements can be made. She noted that often time's workers misinterpret the terminology and intent of the questions from the tool's decision tree. Training is taking place in this area.

In response to Commissioner Hurewitz, Ms. Russell stated that the SCAR system in conjunction with CWS/CMS provides the Hotline staff with information about prior referrals on a family and the subsequent dispositions. This data goes back to 1997.

Ms. Blackwell asked how often staff use overrides with the SDM tool and when are they appropriate and what other assessment tools are staff using during investigations. Ms. Russell stated that training on the appropriate use of overrides is under focus and is receiving attention with the supervising staff.

In response to Chair Williams, Ms. Russell explained that the Hotline is a centralized unit within the Department with 120 social work staff, 24 clerical staff and approximately 20 as needed staff. None of the staff is regionalized.

Commissioner Kleinberg asked if there is any system in place to determine whether the Hotline line staff are correctly assessing the referrals for response. Ms. Russell stated that as the Division Chief she and her staff are constantly interacting with the line staff to understand the strengths and deficiencies in the system. She believes that this type of constant analysis has led to positive change in practice and operation of the Hotline. Commissioner Kleinberg expressed concern that there needs to be a more critical and systematic way in which the referral assessments are reviewed and the accuracy of the SDM tool in evaluating safety and risk. Ms. Russell added that the Hotline referral determinations are now being included in child fatality reviews to establish whether the initial assessments were correct. Chair Williams commented on a recent fatality in which the Department received previous referrals on the family.

Commissioner Kleinberg asked about the scope of the SDM tool to assist in distinguishing the appropriate response time for a referral. Ms. Russell stated that the scope of SDM is limited and that work in developing questions in areas that are not included is needed. Some areas that are not included in the SDM decision tree are questions about the use of drugs and alcohol and mental health.

Commissioner Kleinberg queried Ms. Russell about the CSWs timeliness in responding to mandated reporters, especially those at schools and at law enforcement agencies. Russ Carr, Deputy Director, stated that the Department has initiated an expedited response policy that red flags referrals from those agencies allowing CSWs to go out to these agencies immediately without waiting for a complete referral packet.

Emergency Response Command Post: Mr. Asaye Tsegga explained that the Emergency Response Command Post (ERCP) was solely responsible for after hours, immediate response referrals. The ERCP has 71 CSWs and 12 SCSWs. He further explained that the ERCP CSWs uses only the safety assessment of the SDM tool unless the referral is promoted to a case at which point the risk assessment is utilized. Most cases that come to the ERCP are usually referred to the regional offices for follow up due to the need for additional information, the ERCP CSW was unable to make contact, or because services need to be provided to the family in lieu of detention. The ERCP has four time shifts that include weekends and holidays. ERCP only handles cases that are received after 5pm and adoption cases. Mr. Tsegga explained because adoption staff does not have the training to do investigations and because at one time the division's caseload was so burdensome, ERCP has been directed to do the investigation. Commissioner Hurewitz questioned the distinction of adoption cases to be handled by

ERCP instead of the referral being handled by the regional staff, especially in light of adoption staff being co-located in the regions.

Commissioner Kleinberg asked about the potential for and discussion about decentralizing ERCP as that may have a positive impact on contracting with community agencies willing to work with Department's ERCP on a 24/7 basis so as to potentially mitigate the need for detentions. Deputy Carr shared that the Family Preservation RFP will be issued July 1, 2005 which includes 24/7 services. The Department is decentralizing the ERCP in phases. In addition to being housed at the Borax Building, nine ERCP staff are located at the Paramount Center. The next phase will include co-location at the five HUBs. The third phase will include decentralization into the regional offices. Additionally, eight ERCP staff are co-located at law enforcement agencies and hospitals. Deputy Carr stated that a realistic goal is to see approximately half of the ERCP decentralized.

Commissioner Hurewitz asked if the Department has any cross reference ability with the Department of Mental Health to determine potential safety concerns. Commissioner Hurewitz suggested that the Department advocate for the use of Prop 63 funds for the ability to share data for this purpose. Ms. Russell stated that the Department has the capacity to cross reference some data but not to the extent that may mitigate an inappropriate placement that may result in a child's death.

Commissioner Kleinberg asked where in the case development does ERCP pass on the case to the regional office. Mr. Tsegga stated that after the ERCP worker has investigated the case in its entirety before it is passed on to the regional CSW staff. The regional CSW may have to follow-up on specific information because no contact could be made. The cases that are passed on to the regional staff are those where a detention is necessary.

PUBLIC COMMENT

Amy Pellman, Legal Director, Alliance for Children's Rights, stated that during the Alliances' testimony before the Board of Supervisors the issue of special attention being provided to mandated reporters was addressed. At the time of the testimony, Ms. Pellman stated that the Department denied such a practice. This she said is in direct conflict with the testimony provided at today's meeting in which Deputy Carr stated that the Department has an "expedited response" policy for mandated reporters. The Alliance feels strongly that mandated reports should be given additional weight.

Ms. Pellman provided a brief scenario of the legal options open to ERCP CSWs when investigating a referral. The Alliance's experience is that a child will be placed with a relative with no court interaction or that a parent does not legally consent to the relative placement. Chair Williams said that the Alliance has been quite vocal about this issue in an ongoing Department facilitated committee and is well aware of this issue. Regardless, of the Departments awareness of this issue, Ms. Pellman stated that the practice continues.

The Alliance also contends that the risk assessment conducted by the CSW is not being done appropriately and accurately. The Alliance is advocating that for those cases that have had previous referrals, such assessments would be done with more diligence, care and thoughtfulness. Ms. Pellman acknowledged the Department's efforts to improve its system and make progress; however, the Alliance believes that these efforts are taking place too quickly, without enough education and oversight.

Deputy Carr stated that Department policy dictates that all voluntary placements receive parental consent. He further stated that Dr. Sanders is well aware that there are instances when CSWs work outside the bounds of Department policy and that they are working with the Alliance to identify those cases.

In reference to the December 15, 2004 letter to the BOS from The Alliance, Ms Pellman explained that of the 81 cases where The Alliance allege case mishandling on the part of the Department, some referrals were evaluated out or the investigation was determined to be inconclusive. Once The Alliance intervened, over 50% of the cases were assessed to need intervention. Commissioner Fahey expressed concern about the consequences of reducing the number of detentions.

There was further discussion about the 81 cases referenced in the December 15, 2004 letter to the BOS. Commissioner Kleinberg said that there is not enough information about the cases to determine where the system is failing. She requested that specific aspects of the cases be examined so that the Commission can see what systemic issues are in play. Chair Williams stated that the Department and The Alliance are working together to find a remedy for the cases cited in the letter and asked that Helen Berberian, DCFS, keep the Commission updated on the progress of their dialogue.

MEETING ADJOURNED

Note: Subsequent to the meeting, County Counsel advised the Commission that receipt of any case specific information was not appropriate as the issue is currently before the Board of Supervisors.